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ABSTRACT

Today in Europe, for many students, leaving secondary school does not correspond to the starting point of their working careers. Large proportions of them continue in education, experience a period of unemployment, or attend a training program. Many factors, individual and institutional, can account for differences in students' destinations. This briefing reports the main findings of a study on the effect of individual and school factors on different students' destinations in three countries: the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands, and Scotland. The briefing finds that, among the three countries, different proportions of young people attend various types of schools and enter various post-school destinations, and that without controlling for individual or school factors, the variation across schools in students' destinations tends to be higher in the Netherlands than in Ireland and Scotland. Individual factors are responsible for most of the school variations found in Scotland and both school and individual characteristics contribute to school variations in students' destinations in Ireland. (BT)

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CES Briefing

Variation Across Schools in Young People's Transitions: A Comparative Perspective

by Cristina Iannelli

No. 20, June 2001

Today, for many students, leaving secondary school does not correspond to the starting point of their working career. Large proportions of them continue in education, experience a period of unemployment or attend a training programme. Many factors - individual and institutional - can account for differences in pupils' destinations. This *Briefing* reports the main findings of a study on the effect of individual and school factors on different pupils' destinations in three countries: the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands and Scotland.

- **Schools** in Ireland, the Netherlands and Scotland largely differ in relation to three characteristics: the type of programme offered (vocational, academic or a combination of the two), the private/ public status and the denominational nature.
- **In** the three countries, different proportions of young people attend various types of schools and enter various post-school destinations.
- **Pupils** who attend different schools have different chances of making various post-school transitions. Without controlling for individual or school factors, the variation across schools in pupils' destinations tends to be higher in the Netherlands than in Ireland and Scotland.
- **Different** factors explain school variations in pupils' destinations within each country.
- **Individual** factors are responsible for most of the school variations found in Scotland.
- **In** the Netherlands, curriculum track is the main source of school differentiation. It also leads to very different outcomes for pupils.
- **Both** school and individual characteristics contribute to explain school variations in pupils' destinations in Ireland.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the study of youth transitions. Linked to this growing interest are policy issues such as how to deal with high youth unemployment rates and the growing numbers of young people staying on in education. Implicitly or explicitly research on youth transitions has tried to answer the question: what factors contribute to achieve more or less positive educational and labour market outcomes for young people. Some studies have stressed the importance of individual factors (eg gender, social origin, educational achievement), others emphasised the importance of institutional factors (education system and labour market characteristics). Cross-country comparative studies have also analysed how youth transitions are shaped by different national educational and labour market contexts. In general, however, these studies have neglected the role that the school may play at an intermediate level between young people and larger institutions. It is not unreasonable to think that the school attended influences not only pupils' achievement (as demonstrated in many school effectiveness studies) but also their post-school outcomes. The study presented here starts by investigating the extent of variation between schools in pupils' destinations (further education, employment, unemployment and training programmes) in three countries: the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and the Netherlands. Moreover, within each country it examines how much of the school variation can be accounted for by individual and school factors. The analysis has been carried out using data drawn from a cross-national database of secondary school leavers. Multilevel modelling has been used to distinguish two levels of the analysis: the individual (the lower level) and the school level (the higher level). This technique of analysis has allowed the estimation of separate equations for each school so separating the effect of individual and school characteristics (Paterson, 1991).

Types of schools attended

The analysis of Ireland, Scotland and the Netherlands is particularly interesting because of the different nature of secondary schools in the three countries. Schools can be distinguished according to three main structural characteristics:

- the type of programme provided by the school - vocational, general or a combination of vocational and general subjects;
- the status of the school - private or public;
- the denominational nature - Catholic, Protestant, interdenominational and non-denominational.

The main source of school differentiation varies in the three countries. Dutch schools are very differentiated in the curriculum offered but differences related to the other two characteristics - denomination and private/public status - are much less significant. Traditionally, general and vocational programmes were taught in separate schools and although they can now be taught in the same school, they are still kept separate.

Ireland has a less differentiated system than the Netherlands in terms of curriculum but has a strong religious and private component in the ownership and management of the schools. Private schools ("secondary schools") are essentially denominational and academic. They are owned by religious orders, in particular by Catholic religious orders.

Scotland presents the least differentiated school system in relation to the curriculum: all schools offer the possibility to combine vocational and general subjects (although the curriculum is a mainly general one). The private ("independent") schools differentiate themselves from the public ones, both denominational and non-denominational, by their selective character. Private schools are privately owned and are fee-paying. They often have admission tests and provide a curriculum with a stronger academic emphasis.

The distribution of pupils by type of school shows that Scotland has more homogeneity in the type of schools attended by secondary school leavers compared to Ireland and the Netherlands (Table 1). The great majority of students attended public and non-denominational schools which offer both general and vocational subjects. The other two countries have a more variegated situation in which students are enrolled in schools which offer distinct types of programmes and which are of a different nature. Do these country differences affect pupils' post-school outcomes?

Table 1: Type of school attended by secondary school leavers (academic year 1995-96 in Ireland and the Netherlands and 1993-94 in Scotland)

School characteristics	Ireland	Netherlands	Scotland
Type of curriculum provided			
Combination of general and vocational subjects	13%	12%	100%
General	49%	26%	-
Vocational	38%	63%	-
Private	49%	70%	5%
Public	51%	30%	95%
School denomination			
Catholic	47%	11%	11%
Protestant	1%	16%	-
Interdenominational	51%	28%	-
Non-denominational	-	30%	89%
Not known/unclassified	-	15%	-

Note: some columns do not exactly sum to 100% because the percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole figure.

Pupils' destinations

The distribution of pupils' main activity around one year after leaving secondary school appears very similar in Ireland and the Netherlands (Table 2). In these two countries 40-42 per cent of school-leavers were still in education, another large group of them (respectively 37% and 42%) gained a job, and between 11 and 13 per cent were in training (mostly in apprenticeship and some in youth programmes). The only remarkable difference is in the percentage of those who were unemployed, 9% in Ireland in contrast to 2% in the Netherlands. The situation in Scotland looks very different from the other two countries, especially in regard to two destinations: a lower proportion of young people were employed and a higher proportion of young people were attending a youth programme in Scotland. In Scotland many young people on youth training programmes have employed status. In these data they are counted as participating in youth programmes. In common with Ireland the school leavers' unemployment rate in Scotland is quite high.

Table 2: Secondary school leavers' principal activity around one year after leaving secondary school by country (1997 in Ireland and the Netherlands and 1995 in Scotland)

	Ireland	Netherlands	Scotland
Education	40%	42%	44%
Employment	37%	42%	21%
Unemployment	9%	2%	8%
Apprenticeship	8%	12%	13%
Youth training	3%	1%	12%
Other*	2%	1%	2 %

* This category mainly includes school leavers who are unable to work and those engaged in voluntary work or unpaid work at home.
Note 1: some columns do not exactly sum to 100% because the percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole figure.
Note 2: the proportion of students who are still in education tends to be high in Scotland because in the Scottish dataset FE (Further Education) colleges are counted as destinations and not as schools from which students leave as in the case of similar types of (vocational) schools in Ireland and the Netherlands.

School variation in pupils' destinations

Does the school attended significantly affect students' destinations? How does the effect of the school vary across Ireland, the Netherlands and Scotland?

The analysis of youth transitions showed that, without controlling for individual and school factors, in all three countries schools vary significantly from each other in pupils' outcomes. This means that pupils who attended a certain school instead of another have different chances of making various youth transitions. However, there are cross-country differences in the extent of school variations. School differences in the proportion of pupils entering certain destinations were higher in the Netherlands than in Ireland or Scotland. More precisely, in the transition to further education and to employment school variation in the Netherlands tended to be higher than in Scotland. It was also higher in the Netherlands than in Ireland in the transition to employment and to unemployment. In the comparison between Ireland and Scotland school variation was larger in Ireland only in the transition from school to further education.

The effect of individual and school structural characteristics

Which are the factors explaining school variations in pupils' destinations in Ireland, the Netherlands and Scotland?

In all three countries under examination the most common transitions after leaving school are continuing education and entering the labour market (see Table 2). In Scotland individual characteristics - measured by gender, stage of leaving school and whether students passed or failed school exams - have been found to explain a considerable part of the variation between schools in pupils' chances to continue in education or gain a job. In contrast, the type of programme (vocational or general) taken at school accounted for most of the school variation found in the Netherlands. In Ireland individual characteristics, curriculum and school structural characteristics, all contributed to explain school variation in pupils' transitions to further education and employment. Moreover, in Ireland two other individual factors, social class of origin and grades, emerged as having an important role in affecting these two transitions.

These results show that the strong curriculum differentiation which characterises the Dutch school system is also reflected in very differentiated students' destinations (Iannelli and Raffe, 2000). On the contrary, Scotland has the least differentiated educational system (comprehensive, mainly public and non-denominational) and the effect of curriculum type as well as of school structural characteristics is much less important in explaining school variation than elsewhere. In Ireland the situation seems to be more mixed: the variables used both at the individual and school level add an important piece of information to explain school variation.

In the analysis of the transition from school to unemployment it emerged that experiencing a period of unemployment is more linked to individual characteristics than to the characteristics of the school attended in all three countries. However, curriculum type once again emerged as an important additional factor in the explanation of the school differences in pupils' outcomes in the Netherlands. Also in the transition from school to training programmes, most of the school variations in pupils' destinations could be explained by individual characteristics. These results are not surprising: the influences that the school may have on pupils' chances to continue in education or gain a job

can be easily understandable. To mention some possible interpretations: some schools can better motivate and prepare their pupils to enter tertiary education, while others can orient young people to directly enter the labour market. The quality of teaching, the selective procedures to enter some schools and the resources available to the school are other factors which may affect young people's disposition to continue in education or enter the labour market. Much less clear - probably because less studied - is whether the school has a role in influencing pupils' failure in entering the labour market or pupils' access to youth programmes. The data showed that school variations in these outcomes find little explanation in school characteristics.

Further issues

The study presented here is more descriptive than explanatory: it aimed to map the main factors responsible for school differentiation in pupils' destinations in Ireland, the Netherlands and Scotland. However, there are interesting findings which stimulate further reflection on the possible consequences of more unified or diversified educational systems.

A more unified school system - here represented by Scotland - is characterised by less channelled pathways from school to further education and to the labour market. This seems to minimise school influence on pupils' future destinations. Does it mean that the Scottish school system promotes equality among pupils in educational and labour market opportunities?

In the more differentiated school system of the Netherlands school variation in pupils' destinations is mostly associated with the vocational or academic programme attended by pupils. Does it mean that in the Dutch system the type of curriculum taken is the only factor which really matters in shaping pupils' outcomes?

The study presented here could not answer these questions. Further research is needed which focuses on processes operating within schools in different countries. In particular, it would be interesting to know more about cross-country differences in relation to two main issues:

- the role played by pupils' family background and school actors (eg teachers, tutors and head of the schools) in young people's educational and post-educational decisions - such as track allocation, continuation of studies, participation in training schemes and entering the labour market;
- the way school characteristics interact with the characteristics of the young people attending them, and how this relationship affects young people's destinations.

Further reading

Iannelli,C. (2000) "School Effect on Youth Transitions in Ireland, Scotland and the Netherlands", paper presented to the European Research Network on Transitions in Youth, Antwerp 7-10 September.

Iannelli,C. and Raffe,D. (2000) "Vocational Upper-Secondary Education and the Transition from School" in *A Comparative Analysis of Transitions from Education to Work in Europe - Based on National School Leavers' Surveys*. Dublin. ESRI Working Papers.

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Paterson,L. (1991) "An Introduction to Multilevel Modelling", in S.W. Raudenbush and J.D. Willms (eds) **Schools, Classrooms, and Pupils**, pp. 13-24, San Diego: Academic Press.

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Further information

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About this study

This research draws on work carried out as part of the CATEWE (Comparative Analysis of Transitions from Education to Work in Europe) project funded under the EC TSER programme from 1997 to 2000 (www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/catewe/). Within this project a cross-national database has been constructed which includes secondary school leavers from France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Scotland and Sweden. The subsample analysed in this study comprises young people, girls and boys, who left school at different stages of secondary school in 1995-96 in Ireland and the Netherlands and in 1993-94 in Scotland. The methodology used is multilevel modelling.

Related CES *Briefings*

No.10: 'School-to-Work Transitions in Ireland and Scotland, 1979-1991' by Emer Smyth and Paula Surridge.

No.15: 'The Unification of Post-16 Education' by Cathy Howieson and David Raffe.

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